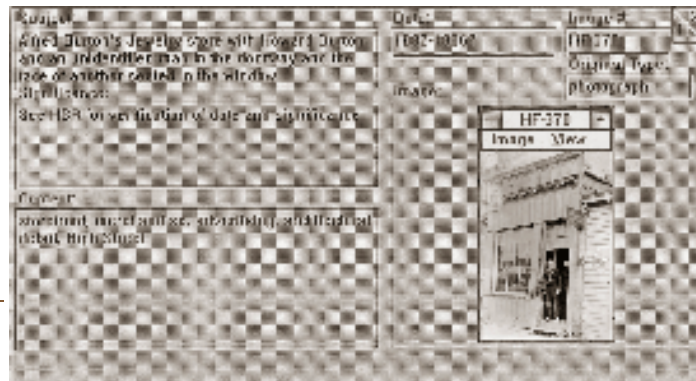


Patricia Chickering

Harpers Ferry's History Database

A data screen from the park's photolog system, a computerized inventory of 2,000 historical photographs.



The cultural and natural resources of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park attract hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. Excursionists, hikers, sight-seers, history buffs, and naturalists tour preserved and restored buildings, and enjoy unparalleled scenic beauty. They absorb the town's historic lore—everything from stories of the United States Armory and John Brown's Raid to accounts of floods which often (and as recently as this past January) devastated the town. Wetland flora and fauna, timbered hillsides, and nearby canal walks provide intimate glimpses of an abundant natural heritage. Beyond the park's boundaries, shops,

restaurants, hotels, and recreation facilities cater to visitors.

A diverse population thus benefits from the park's attractions. The park has, therefore, long recognized an obligation to assure the integrity and accuracy of its interpretive and historic preservation programs.

To meet that obligation, in 1989 the park began developing a treasure less visible than its cultural and natural resources: its innovative History Database. Established to support park preservation and develop-

ment programs, the database evolved to serve a variety of users—ranging from park staff to ancestor-hunters—with authors, historians, and event planners included.

Until the late 1980s, the park's interpretive time-frame ranged between the 1859 John Brown Raid and the Civil War. During the early park development period in the 1950s, historical

research for the park had, therefore, not extended beyond the Civil War. But the park's 1987 Resource Management Plan, which recognized the need to expand the time-frame into the 20th century, mandated a new research effort.

Historians in the 1950s compiled a card index to a huge body of local primary resource material covering the interpretive period. They examined over 30,000 pages of historical documents and catalogued nearly 600 historical maps, photographs, and prints. That resource remained in 1988, when research to support the new and broader interpretive time-span became necessary. Park professionals recognized an opportunity to apply modern computer capability to untapped resources and to the earlier data, and the result is the History Database, a user-friendly index to a massive body of information.

In 1988, the project to create a computerized history database was approved, with work to begin in January 1989. Because the park lacked the needed professional staff, research historian positions were filled under a Cooperative Agreement between the National Park Service and the University of Maryland History Department.

The first order of business was to design the database to incorporate a three-part index to courthouse records, censuses, and local newspapers. The research historians located a combination of computer software programs which suited the project's needs, and developed data entry styles. Census and Court records were entered in dBase, and newspaper data was entered in WordPerfect. WordCruncher software, developed by Brigham Young University and currently marketed by Johnston & Company of Bloomington, IN, was used to index the data.

Researchers visited the Jefferson County courthouse in Charles Town and created deed chains for property within park boundaries, then entered each record in the database. All available local census information was likewise entered. But by far the largest task involved reading and extracting locally-relevant data from 19th- and early-20th-century newspapers, summarizing the



Burton's Jewelry Store. Howard Burton, son of proprietor Alfred Burton, in doorway; 1882-1889 photo courtesy Harpers Ferry NHP.

information, and entering it in the database. Newspaper reading initially focussed on the Spirit of Jefferson of Charles Town, but when bound volumes of the post-Civil War *Virginia Free Press* were found in the Jefferson County Courthouse, they too were read and entered, as well as pre-Civil War issues of that same paper which had been examined in the 1950s. When it became obvious the integrity of the newspaper database rested on its being as comprehensive as possible, a third publication, *The Farmers Advocate* was read and entered.

There were gaps in newspaper collections, however. To fill those, and to supplement the census record (the National 1890 census was lost to fire), historians began searching archival collections at various repositories. They looked for miss-

Research and technology reveal the past, inform the present, and enlighten the future.

ing issues of newspapers, for 1890s population data, and in short for any relevant local information. The database absorbed it all.

Because WordCruncher indexes each unique word or character, researchers can search by word or combination of words, by date, or by other alphabetical or numerical entities. The user-friendly software presents information in capsule form and identifies the resource's location. Researchers can assemble and print data files in minutes, and then access the primary resource material. Harpers Ferry National Historical Park thus has in its History Database a unique research tool, accessible to park interpreters and archeologists, to researchers who visit the park library, and to staff at the Interpretive Design Center at Harpers Ferry Center.

The database went to work for the park almost from its inception. In 1989, while in its infancy, it supported the first draft History Section for the Historic Structure Report (HSR) for Park Development Package 116 and for the archeological investigations of the Package 116 site conducted that summer. The database pinpointed previous improvements made to Package 116 buildings. It also contributed to the building's socio-economic history by identifying occupants and type of use.

Concurrently with work on Package 116, Harpers Ferry Center designers of the Frankel Brothers Clothing Store exhibit and the reconstructed Burton Jewelry Store (both opened in 1991) made extensive use of the database. The database also supported Interpretive Design Center staff in developing a streetscape study and

interior plans for Package 116 and Park Buildings 5, 7, and 16.

In the summer of 1993, the History Database spawned another innovation—the Photolog Project. Begun as a program to index captions to the park's historical photograph collection as part of the History Database, the project evolved into an image retrieval system, with scanned images linked to text. The text-to-image link permits electronic access to the photographs much as the History Database facilitates access to primary resources. The Photolog project has proven tremendously helpful in expediting access to the park's collection of over 2,000 historical photographs.

As word of the History Database spread, historians began receiving research requests from both inside and outside the park. Inquiries ranged from a request for details of Civil War pontoon bridges over the Potomac River to a question about an advertising sign on the Maryland Heights cliff face. Visitors who searched the database for ancestors usually found them, and, by sharing clues they brought, those visitors invariably contributed new information on local property and residents.

Early in the project, an analogy developed in the mind of this historian: working with the database was like creating a paint-by-number scene. Myriad bits of information emerged from the database and created a local picture—almost without effort, and in remarkably accurate context.

While the database has contributed immeasurably to knowledge and understanding of all aspects of Harpers Ferry, much remains to be done. Resources exist within the park which could augment the database, thus contributing to a more comprehensive view of over two centuries of history. Many data sources have been identified but not yet investigated or documented. For example, financial accounts of the U. S. Armory and Arsenal for the first half of the 19th century—data available on microfilm in the park—would greatly enhance future studies of the Armory (which would be mandated should the Armory property be added to the park).

In the meantime, however, the database remains a priceless resource—a monument to the vision that inspired it and to the scholarship and dedication of its creators. It is a legacy to all who work in Harpers Ferry Park, and to those who come to experience the park's many attractions.

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